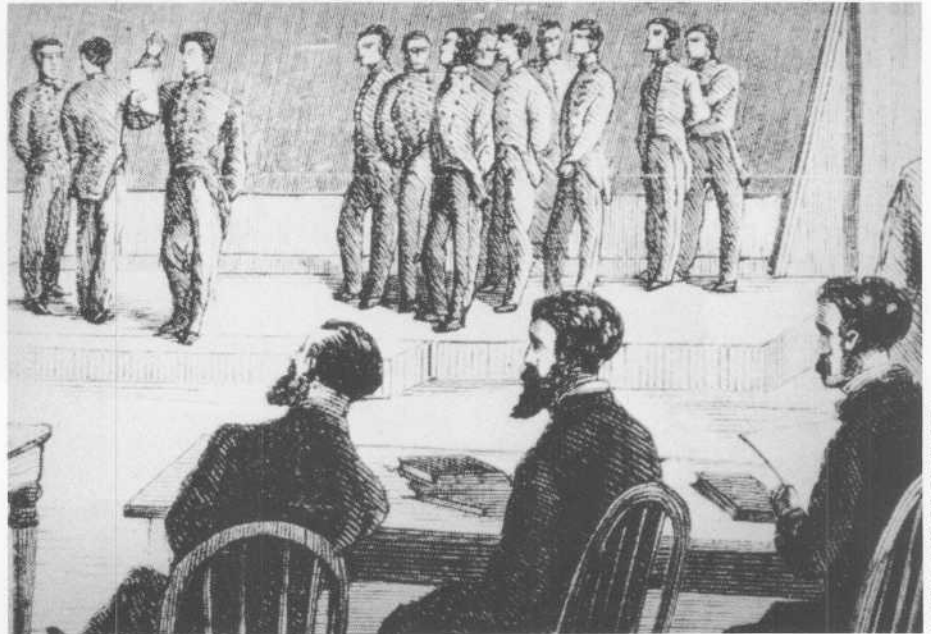




# The Corps and the Military Academy at West Point, 1802-1866



Early West Point class.



Early view of West Point.

During the American Revolution many officers, including General George Washington, the commander in chief, saw the need for technical education so that the Army would have skilled, native American engineer officers in the future. When Congress established the companies of Sappers and Miners in 1778, it stated that the companies were to receive instruction in field works. In subsequent general orders Washington referred to the Sappers and Miners as "a school of engineering." Regulations issued in 1779 for the Corps of Engineers and companies of Sappers and Miners declared that the Sappers and Miners were to receive instruction at times when they were not exercising duties. The chief engineer was to devise an instructional program and appoint engineer officers to give lectures. The amount of education actually given the Sappers and

Miners during the Revolution was minimal.

During the debate over a peacetime military establishment in 1783, several Army officers proposed establishing an academy at West Point either as the sole military academy or as one of several academies. Engineers particularly were thought to need formal training. When Congress decided against a peacetime standing Army, the need for an academy disappeared.

Some instruction did occur at West Point from 1794 until 1796, but it was not until March 16, 1802, that Congress reestablished a separate Corps of Engineers and constituted the Corps as the Military Academy. As Chief Engineer, Jonathan Williams, grand-nephew of Benjamin Franklin and a man keenly interested in the development of science, became the Academy's first superintendent. Williams introduced

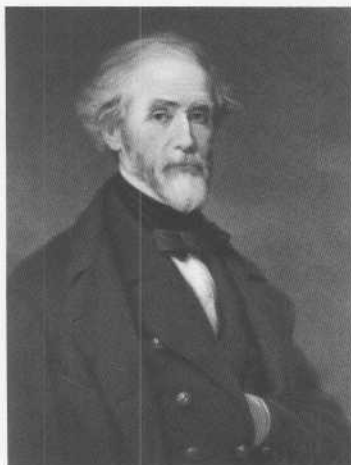
Portrayal of West Point student at work.



West Point, from a L'Enfant  
watercolor.

Reenactment of West Point  
classroom instruction.





Office of History, Corps of Engineers

Dennis H. Mahan.

new texts from England and the continent and by 1808 had broadened the curriculum from its heavy emphasis on mathematics to include engineering. In 1812 Congress created a professorship of engineering at the Academy. It was the first such position at an institution of higher learning in the United States.

Major advances in the organization and the course of study, as well as an honor code and a disciplinary system, followed under Sylvanus Thayer, superintendent from 1817 until 1833. Thayer patterned the reorganization of the Academy on the program he observed at the Ecole Polytechnique while on a visit to France. Claudius Crozet, who occupied the professorship of engineer-

(1836) and the *Course of Civil Engineering*, which first appeared in 1837.

In 1800 Secretary of War James McHenry had emphasized that fortification was only one part of the engineering profession. The engineer's utility, he declared, "extends to almost every Department of War; besides embracing whatever respects public buildings, roads, bridges, canals and all such works of a civil nature." After the War of 1812 West Point exemplified McHenry's dictum. The Academy was the first school of engineering in America and for many years produced graduates who played a major role in the internal improvement of the nation.

The Military Academy contin-



National Archives

ing from 1817-1823 and was a graduate of the Ecole Polytechnique, introduced numerous French texts in his courses. Later, under Dennis Hart Mahan, the Academy's reputation as a school of civil engineering advanced still further. In his lectures Mahan, an 1824 graduate with a commission in the Corps of Engineers, drew upon his experiences while on duty in Europe (1826-1830). He prepared and added several texts to the West Point curriculum. The most important were *A Treatise on Field Fortification*

used under the supervision of the Corps of Engineers until 1866, when Congress opened the superintendency to all branches of the Army and placed control of the Academy under the secretary of war, thus ending the Chief of Engineers' role as Inspector. This change responded in part to the fact that the Academy supported the entire Army, not just the engineers. Mathematics, science and engineering remained at the center of the curriculum.